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BRINGING HER TALENTS HOME

*A Greenville native takes on a
question from her childhood.*

By Andrew Huang '11



Here's a shortcut to feeling inspired: Look at Shaniece Criss' LinkedIn page.

Criss is a Furman University assistant professor of health science, a Travelers Rest city councilwoman and a public health consultant. She's a Riley Institute Diversity Leaders Initiative fellow, a Shucker Leadership Institute Faculty Fellow and a faculty affiliate for the Shi Center for Sustainability. She also serves on the boards of directors for Prisma Health, SC YMCA Youth in Government & Teen Achievers, and Public Education Partners.

And then there are her degrees, including a Doctor of Science from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and a Master of Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

"I like to do a lot of things," says Criss.

There's purpose behind every obligation and achievement, too: It's how she practices what she preaches and feeds her passion for public health.

"I'm using this theory, the social-ecological model," she explains. "It says you have to look at the individual, interpersonal, organizational and institutional, the community, communications strategies and policy. I'm a huge proponent that you have to use that perspective to address public health."

And what better way to understand this complex, multifaceted perspective than to participate?

"As a professor, I'm affecting the individual – students – and the interpersonal – their friends and family. But I'm also teaching them how to be advocates with policy. Then on the Travelers Rest City Council, we can think about the policies that affect health outcomes, like putting in sidewalks and bike lanes," she

says. "I can hear from the community about their concerns and then use research and theory to decide, 'What is the appropriate response?'"



Shaniece Criss on the campaign trail with her family.



Criss assists students during a workshop to identify strengths.

Criss offers an example of work she did in partnership with Prisma Health-Upstate, when the health system identified an uptick in child abuse in an area of Greenville County. She worked with pediatricians who brought in Triple P: Positive Parenting Program.

“It is an effective, peer-reviewed health intervention that can really improve parenting strategies. In addition to the intervention, I did focus groups to understand the context of how these parents were disciplined when they were growing up, what they thought about it and what they thought about Triple P,” says Criss. “What we found – which was interesting because Triple P focuses

on strategies and does not directly address corporal punishment – was that through the intervention alone, people were much more willing to try other strategies before resorting to corporal punishment.”

She’s working on a paper about this relationship and how it can help empower people with alternative strategies even without directly talking about a behavior.

Criss takes this holistic approach into the classroom, too.

“She draws upon every source and aspect of an issue to completely analyze all sides of a discussion,” says **Jamie Riedy ’21**. “Her diverse background of knowledge supports her excellent teaching. The fact that she is a member of city council and sits on several boards is an inspiration to how public health should be accomplished.”

Another one of her students, **Becca Bosch ’19**, said Criss’ devotion to public health envelops those around her.

“She really cares about making an impact on the community, and you can see that in her work every day,” says Bosch. “It’s impossible to be around her and not feel passionate about public health, too.”

Of course, Criss didn’t start with this complex understanding of public health. It was just a natural direction for someone who grew up wanting to help people.

“It’s just this prompting I’ve always had – to listen to what people want, need and desire, and to try to help with that.”

Growing up in Greenville, she came upon a gathering revelation.

“I’d be watching the news, and when it was about health, black people would always have worse health outcomes. I was so frustrated with that. I thought, ‘Why is that the case? I have to do something about it!’”



Criss speaks to Summer Advantage Scholars at The Riley Institute.



Criss is sworn in to the Travelers Rest City Council in 2018.



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Although education and work took Criss away from South Carolina’s Upstate region, 2016 proved a serendipitous year to bring her home. She was finishing her second master’s degree in Boston, Furman was starting a public health program, and Greenville had begun showing up on national lists as an up-and-coming destination for work, play and travel.

Along with the teaching and research opportunities that came with a professorship at Furman, Criss found the Upstate’s philanthropic landscape a boon to her work.

“When I came back as an adult, I thought, ‘Wow, there’s a lot of nonprofits and coalitions trying to make a difference.’ There are so many opportunities to get involved, and Greenville is the size where you can really see your impact.” ♦



Jackie Hirons '20 speaks with Criss on campus.